

CRITICAL ESSAY FOR ENGLISH 12AP SUMMER READING ASSIGNMENT

Why Read the Classics?

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Let us begin with a few suggested definitions.

1) The classics are the books of which we usually hear people say: “I am rereading...” and never “I am reading....”

This at least happens among those who consider themselves “very well read.” It does not hold good for young people at the age when they first encounter the world, and the classics as a part of that world.

The reiterative prefix before the verb “read” may be a small hypocrisy on the part of people ashamed to admit they have not read a famous book. To reassure them, we need only observe that, however vast any person’s basic reading may be, there still remain an enormous number of fundamental works that he has not read.

Hands up, anyone who has read the whole of Herodotus and the whole of Thucydides! And Saint-Simon? And Cardinal de Retz? But even the great nineteenth-century cycles of novels are more often talked about than read. In France they begin to read Balzac in school, and judging by the number of copies in circulation, one may suppose that they go on reading him even after that, but if a Gallup poll were taken in Italy, I’m afraid that Balzac would come in practically last. Dickens fans in Italy form a tiny elite; as soon as its members meet, they begin to chatter about characters and episodes as if they were discussing people and things of their own acquaintance. Years ago, while teaching in America, Michel Butor got fed up with being asked about Emile Zola, whom he had never read, so he made up his mind to read the entire *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. He found it was completely different from what he had thought: a fabulous mythological and cosmogonical family tree, which he went on to describe in a wonderful essay.

In other words, to read a great book for the first time in one’s maturity is an extraordinary pleasure, different from (though one cannot say greater or lesser than) the pleasure of having read it in one’s youth. Youth brings to reading, as to any other experience, a particular flavor and a particular sense of importance, whereas in maturity one appreciates (or ought to appreciate) many more details and levels and meanings. We may therefore attempt the next definition:

2) We use the word “classics” for those books that are treasured by those who have read and loved them; but they are treasured no less by those who have the luck to read them for the first time in the best conditions to enjoy them.

In fact, reading in youth can be rather unfruitful, owing to impatience, distraction, inexperience with the product’s “instructions for use,” and inexperience in life itself. Books read then can be (possibly at one and the same time) formative, in the sense that they give a form to future

experiences, providing models, terms of comparison, schemes for classification, scales of value, exemplars of beauty—all things that continue to operate even if the book read in one's youth is almost or totally forgotten. If we reread the book at a mature age we are likely to rediscover these constants, which by this time are part of our inner mechanisms, but whose origins we have long forgotten. A literary work can succeed in making us forget it as such, but it leaves its seed in us. The definition we can give is therefore this:

3) The classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious.

There should therefore be a time in adult life devoted to revisiting the most important books of our youth. Even if the books have remained the same (though they do change, in the light of an altered historical perspective), we have most certainly changed, and our encounter will be an entirely new thing.

Hence, whether we use the verb "read" or the verb "reread" is of little importance. Indeed, we may say:

4) Every rereading of a classic is as much a voyage of discovery as the first reading.

5) Every reading of a classic is in fact a rereading.

Definition 4 may be considered a corollary of this next one:

6) A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.

Whereas definition 5 depends on a more specific formula, such as this:

7) The classics are the books that come down to us bearing upon them the traces of readings previous to ours, and bringing in their wake the traces they themselves have left on the culture or cultures they have passed through (or, more simply, on language and customs).

All this is true both of the ancient and of the modern classics. If I read the *Odyssey* I read Homer's text, but I cannot forget all that the adventures of Ulysses have come to mean in the course of the centuries, and I cannot help wondering if these meanings were implicit in the text, or whether they are incrustations or distortions or expansions. When reading Kafka, I cannot avoid approving or rejecting the legitimacy of the adjective "Kafkaesque," which one is likely to hear every quarter of an hour, applied indiscriminately. If I read Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* or Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, I cannot help thinking how these characters have continued to be reincarnated right down to our own day.

The reading of a classic ought to give us a surprise or two vis-à-vis the notion that we had of it. For this reason I can never sufficiently highly recommend the direct reading of the text itself, leaving aside the critical biography, commentaries, and interpretations as much as possible. Schools and universities ought to help us to understand that no book that talks *about* a book says more than the book in question, but instead they do their level best to make us think the opposite. There is a very widespread topsyturviness of values whereby the introduction, critical apparatus,

and bibliography are used as a smoke screen to hide what the text has to say, and, indeed, can say only if left to speak for itself without intermediaries who claim to know more than the text does. We may conclude that:

8) A classic does not necessarily teach us anything we did not know before. In a classic we sometimes discover something we have always known (or thought we knew), but without knowing that this author said it first, or at least is associated with it in a special way. And this, too, is a surprise that gives a lot of pleasure, such as we always gain from the discovery of an origin, a relationship, an affinity. From all this we may derive a definition of this type:

9) The classics are books that we find all the more new, fresh, and unexpected upon reading, the more we thought we knew them from hearing them talked about.

Naturally, this only happens when a classic really works as such—that is, when it establishes a personal rapport with the reader. If the spark doesn't come, that's a pity; but we do not read the classics out of duty or respect, but only out of love. Except at school. And school should enable you to know, either well or badly, a certain number of classics among which—or in reference to which—you can then choose *your* classics. School is obliged to give you the instruments needed to make a choice, but the choices that count are those that occur outside and after school.

It is only by reading without bias that you might possibly come across the book that becomes *your* book. I know an excellent art historian, an extraordinarily well-read man, who out of all the books there are has focused his special love on the *Pickwick Papers*; at every opportunity he comes up with some quip from Dickens's book, and connects each and every event in life with some Pickwickian episode. Little by little he himself, and true philosophy, and the universe, have taken on the shape and form of the *Pickwick Papers* by a process of complete identification. In this way we arrive at a very lofty and demanding notion of what a classic is:

10) We use the word "classic" of a book that takes the form of an equivalent to the universe, on a level with the ancient talismans. With this definition we are approaching the idea of the "total book," as Mallarmé conceived of it.

But a classic can establish an equally strong rapport in terms of opposition and antithesis. Everything that Jean-Jacques Rousseau thinks and does is very dear to my heart, yet everything fills me with an irrepressible desire to contradict him, to criticize him, to quarrel with him. It is a question of personal antipathy on a temperamental level, on account of which I ought to have no choice but not to read him; and yet I cannot help numbering him among *my* authors. I will therefore say:

11) *Your* classic author is the one you cannot feel indifferent to, who helps you to define yourself in relation to him, even in dispute with him.

I think I have no need to justify myself for using the word "classic" without making distinctions about age, style, or authority. What distinguishes the classic, in the argument I am making, may be only an echo effect that holds good both for an ancient work and for a modern one that has already achieved its place in a cultural continuum. We might say:

12) A classic is a book that comes before other classics; but anyone who has read the others first, and then reads this one, instantly recognizes its place in the family tree.

At this point I can no longer put off the vital problem of how to relate the reading of the classics to the reading of all the other books that are anything but classics. It is a problem connected with such questions as, Why read the classics rather than concentrate on books that enable us to understand our own times more deeply? or, Where shall we find the time and peace of mind to read the classics, overwhelmed as we are by the avalanche of current events?

We can, of course, imagine some blessed soul who devotes his reading time exclusively to Lucretius, Lucian, Montaigne, Erasmus, Quevedo, Marlowe, the *Discourse on Method*, *Wilhelm Meister*, Coleridge, Ruskin, Proust, and Valéry, with a few forays in the direction of Murasaki or the Icelandic sagas. And all this without having to write reviews of the latest publications, or papers to compete for a university chair, or articles for magazines on tight deadlines. To keep up such a diet without any contamination, this blessed soul would have to abstain from reading the newspapers, and never be tempted by the latest novel or sociological investigation. But we have to see how far such rigor would be either justified or profitable. The latest news may well be banal or mortifying, but it nonetheless remains a point at which to stand and look both backward and forward. To be able to read the classics you have to know “from where” you are reading them; otherwise both the book and the reader will be lost in a timeless cloud. This, then, is the reason why the greatest “yield” from reading the classics will be obtained by someone who knows how to alternate them with the proper dose of current affairs. And this does not necessarily imply a state of imperturbable inner calm. It can also be the fruit of nervous impatience, of a huffing-and-puffing discontent of mind.

Maybe the ideal thing would be to hearken to current events as we do to the din outside the window that informs us about traffic jams and sudden changes in the weather, while we listen to the voice of the classics sounding clear and articulate inside the room. But it is already a lot for most people if the presence of the classics is perceived as a distant rumble far outside a room that is swamped by the trivia of the moment, as by a television at full blast. Let us therefore add:

13) A classic is something that tends to relegate the concerns of the moment to the status of background noise, but at the same time this background noise is something we cannot do without.

14) A classic is something that persists as a background noise even when the most incompatible momentary concerns are in control of the situation.

There remains the fact that reading the classics appears to clash with our rhythm of life, which no longer affords long periods of time or the spaciousness of humanistic leisure. It also contradicts the eclecticism of our culture, which would never be capable of compiling a catalog of things classical such as would suit our needs.

These latter conditions were fully realized in the case of Leopardi, given his solitary life in his father's house (his “*paterno ostello*”), his cult of Greek and Latin antiquity, and the formidable library put at his disposal by his father, Monaldo. To which we may add the entire body of Italian literature and of French literature, with the exception of novels and the “latest thing out” in

general, all of which were at least swept off into the sidelines, there to comfort the leisure of his sister Paolina (“*your Stendhal*,” he wrote her once). Even with his intense interest in science and history, he was often willing to rely on texts that were not entirely up-to-date, taking the habits of birds from Buffon, the mummies of Frederik Ruysch from Fontanelle, the voyage of Columbus from Robertson.

In these days a classical education like the young Leopardi’s is unthinkable; above all, Count Monaldo’s library has multiplied explosively. The ranks of the old titles have been decimated, while new ones have proliferated in all modern literatures and cultures. There is nothing for it but for all of us to invent our own ideal libraries of classics. I would say that such a library ought to be composed half of books we have read and that have really counted for us, and half of books we propose to read and presume will come to count—leaving a section of empty shelves for surprises and occasional discoveries.

I realize that Leopardi is the only name I have cited from Italian literature—a result of the explosion of the library. Now I ought to rewrite the whole article to make it perfectly clear that the classics help us to understand who we are and where we stand, a purpose for which it is indispensable to compare Italians with foreigners and foreigners with Italians.

Then I ought to rewrite it yet again lest anyone believe that the classics ought to be read because they “serve any purpose” whatever. The only reason one can possibly adduce is that to read the classics is better than not to read the classics.

And if anyone objects that it is not worth taking so much trouble, then I will quote Cioran (who is not yet a classic, but will become one):

While they were preparing the hemlock, Socrates was learning a tune on the flute. “What good will it do you,” they asked, “to know this tune before you die?”

—*translated by Patrick Creagh*